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A (PARTIAL) REHABILITATION OF EUTHYPHRO

by

ANDREW GILLEY

Under the Direction of Timothy O'Keefe, PhD

ABSTRACT

I argue that the character Euthyphro in the dialogue that bears his name has a more sophisticated conception of religion than he is typically regarded to have, even if he cannot articulate it.

Through an analysis of Euthyphro's use of the word 'pollution' in the dialogue, I establish that Euthyphro has non-traditional religious views, in contrast with the common interpretation that he represents a typical Athenian view. I then argue that Socrates, too, has religious views, and that the two characters have a surprising amount of common ground in their religious beliefs. Finally, I defend Euthyphro's character by appealing to his commitment to pollution and cleansing his father.

INDEX WORDS: Plato, Euthyphro, Piety, Pollution, Socrates, Dialogue

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ANDREW GILLEY

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ANDREW GILLEY

Committee Chair: Timothy O'Keefe

Committee: Jessica Berry

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Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my wife, Rachel, for enduring with me through this entire process.

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Thank you to Tim O’Keefe, both in his role as Director of Graduate Studies here at Georgia State and as my thesis advisor. Thanks also to Jessica Berry for agreeing to embark on this project with me and her insightful comments on my writing, here and elsewhere. Thanks to my many colleagues who listened to my ideas and gave me feedback on them that was instrumental to the formation of this paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	VII
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 SETTING THE STAGE.....	2
3 WHAT IS POLLUTION?	3
4 WHAT DOES POLLUTION TELL US ABOUT EUTHYPHRO?	6
5 THE POSITIVE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF SOCRATES	10
6 DOES EUTHYPHRO'S BAD REASONING IMPUGN HIS CHARACTER?	19
7 CONCLUSION	29
WORKS CITED.....	35

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Euthyphro—*Euth.*

1 INTRODUCTION

In the *Euthyphro*, the titular character is typically thought to be portrayed as an inept zealot. He is reduced to a philosophical punching bag for Socrates' obviously superior intellect.¹ This is an overly simplistic interpretation. While Euthyphro is not the most capable debater, he has more depth to his views than he is typically given credit for. In this paper, I will argue that Euthyphro has a sophisticated view about pious action, even if he is unable to articulate it fully. Furthermore, I will argue that his view shares surprising similarities to Socrates'. My argument hinges on Euthyphro's use of the concept of 'miasma,' or from here on, 'pollution.' In Section II, I will sketch out some essential background of the dialogue. In section III I will discuss pollution, its place in Greek religion, and Euthyphro's use of the term. In section IV I will outline what we can glean about Euthyphro's religious views from his use of the term pollution. In Section V I will present an argument for a modest conception of Socrates' positive religious views and will examine the overlap between Socrates' and Euthyphro's views. In Section VI, I will anticipate a potential objection to my view by responding to an article by Adler and Vasiliou. Their article is engaged in a project similar to the one I embark on in this paper, but they arrive at a condemnation of Euthyphro's character, which contradicts my view that invoking pollution renders Euthyphro's actions far more understandable. Disproving this view is important not only to preserve my interpretation of Euthyphro, but also to highlight the importance of considering pollution to inform our reading of the dialogue.

¹ For some examples of this view see: Taylor 1929, Allen 1970, Morris 1990, and Teloh 1986. For a more complete list of detractors see Beversluis 2000, 162.

2 SETTING THE STAGE

Euthyphro begins on the steps of the Athenian courthouse. Socrates is on his way to his own trial. He is charged with corrupting the youth and not believing in the gods of the city. Before his trial is played out in the *Apology*, Socrates meets Euthyphro, who is pursuing a suit of his own. Euthyphro is a temple priest who is bringing some unusual charges before the court. He is seeking to prosecute his father for murder. Socrates is shocked by this information (*Euth.* 4a6-7).² This is an unusual case, but the reader is not meant to think it is unusual for legal reasons. While some scholars have argued about the legal merits of the case itself, McPherran notes that, if the case were not prosecutable, “We would expect that Plato would have then had his Socrates at least make note of Euthyphro’s ignorance of the law for the sake of verisimilitude and dramatic plausibility” (McPherran, 2002, 109). What many Athenians would find objectionable about this case are not its legal implications, but its religious ones.

Athenian religion would traditionally object to Euthyphro’s action on the grounds of filial piety, which would indicate that a son should not prosecute his father. The case is further complicated by the social and moral status of the victim. The victim of this murder case was a γεωργέω of Euthyphro’s father, which translates to thrall, hired workman, or landed proprietor (*Euth.* 4c4). This thrall killed a slave while drunk. Euthyphro’s father was angered by this and bound the thrall in a ditch while he sent an envoy to the temple. Euthyphro’s father wanted to learn from the temple priests what should be done about this case, but the thrall died in the ditch before anything could be done (*Euth.* 4c 5-7). Euthyphro seeks to prosecute his father for the neglect of the thrall that leads to the thrall’s death.

² All translations are taken from Cooper & Hutchinson, 1997.

There are two irregularities to this case, from the standpoint of traditional Athenian religion. The first was mentioned above: it was most often considered impious for a son to prosecute his father. The second is the nature of the victim. The victim was already a murderer, as well as being of very low status. These irregularities present a problem for the reader: it is not obvious that Euthyphro's father should be prosecuted at all. Euthyphro is doing something quite out of the ordinary here. The stakes are high. Euthyphro's father is presented with a "genuine threat" (McPherran, 2002, p. 109). His freedom and status are threatened by his son's prosecution. Euthyphro is threatened, even if he succeeds, with becoming a social pariah and the potential guilt of sending his own father away. Thus, Euthyphro must be committed to the rightness of his action. His confidence stems from his beliefs about pollution.

3 WHAT IS POLLUTION?

The word "μίασμα" (miasma) is most commonly translated as 'pollution,' but it has a few other meanings that help flesh out what the word meant in context. It may also be translated as 'stain,' referring to, in the context of Greek religious practice, a stain on the soul. More straightforwardly, it may also be translated as defilement, where one's soul is defiled by a certain action.³ Parker notes: "[pollution] almost always refers to a condition that has some, and usually all, of the following characteristics: it makes the person affected ritually impure, and thus unfit to enter a temple: it is contagious: it is dangerous, and this danger is not of familiar secular origin" (Parker, 2011, 3–4).

³ These alternative translations are taken from Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott from Tufts University's Perseus Project.

Euthyphro has these aspects of pollution in the forefront of his mind when he goes to prosecute his father. He tells Socrates, “The pollution is the same if you knowingly keep company with such a man and do not cleanse yourself and him by bringing him to justice” (*Euth.* 4c 1-3). “Such a man” seems to be one who has committed a crime that renders him impure. Euthyphro has the contagious nature of pollution squarely in mind when bringing his father to trial. His soul is vulnerable too, and unless he does something about it, Euthyphro is subject to the same penalties that pollution visits upon the stained.

Pollution is also linked to negative consequences in the material world. An example that Parker uses is that of the weather, where sacrifice was used to appease the gods and prevent bad weather. Conversely, “Storms could be caused by human pollution” (Parker, 2011, 3). Traditionally pious actions like sacrifice were used as a sort of cleansing effect for pollution in religious communities. Euthyphro himself notes, ““The opposite of these pleasing [pious] actions are impious and overturn and destroy everything” (*Euth.* 14b7-8). Euthyphro here demonstrates that he is preoccupied with the negative consequences of pollution, and that they are a motivating factor for him.

An important aspect of pollution in Ancient Greek religion is that there is not one unified doctrine of what actions are and are not polluting. Parker mentions that contact with the cults surrounding Greek heroes “is sometimes polluting, sometimes not” (Parker, 2011, 110). He notes, “Very occasionally, the act of sacrifice was treated as a polluting killing” (Parker, 2011, 205). This lack of unity allows Euthyphro to make the claims that he does; there is no obvious criterion for sorting out polluting and unpolluting actions in cases such as the one Euthyphro prosecutes against his father. If cases were easily sorted, there would be no question about whether Euthyphro’s interpretation was right. However, there are still

orthodox opinions, and Euthyphro is judged according to those. The fact that there are alternative interpretations make Euthyphro's position conceptually and religiously possible to hold, but based on the reaction he receives, we know that Euthyphro holds a fringe view.

Finally, pollution is a religious condition. By religious, what I mean is that it is bound up with Greek religion, and pertains to theological issues. Precisely what this entails is somewhat contested in the scholarship surrounding the term. Some scholars want to divide the more explicitly religiously-coded term ἄγος (*agos*, translated pollution or guilt) from *miasma* (Parker, 1983, 8). *Agos* refers to someone's having guilt in committing a crime and thus becoming religiously polluted, whereas some scholars believe that *miasma* ought to be regarded as lacking a religious connotation. If *miasma* ought to be distinguished as areligious and *agos* as religiously coded, this could present a problem for my thesis. Plato's use of *miasma* would not carry the religious weight that I ascribe to it, which would render many of my inferences invalid. If *miasma* is not religious, then I cannot make the connection from Euthyphro's preoccupation with pollution to his religious beliefs.

However, I believe, at least as far as Plato uses the terms *miasma* and *agos*, the two are virtually synonymous. The conceptual difference between these two conditions is in origin; *agos* is considered to come from divine anger, and *miasma* appears without any particular link to divine anger. Because pollution does not require the intervention of a god, it follows that the nature of pollution that it does not discriminate; it spreads like a pathogen, whether an individual is personally at fault or not means as little to pollution as it does to typhoid fever (Parker, 1983, 9). Both words are also used interchangeably in Ancient Greek myths. Divine anger, *miasma*, and *agos* are all invoked in Aeschylus' *Supplikes* whenever proper reverence is ignored (Parker, 1983, 9). There might be a conceptual difference in the

origin of these two effects, but the two come in tandem in virtually all Greek myths; if you are under the effects of *miasma*, you are under the effects of *agos*, and vice versa. The distinction that some scholars propose is not drawn in the myths themselves. From a practical standpoint, the conceptual split between sacrifice and purification as a response to these two conditions is also less clear. In theory, sacrifice would be conducted to appease a deity and cleanse *agos* and purification rituals would seek to cleanse *miasma*, a more impersonal pollution. In practice, both conditions would often be cleansed through the same process (Parker, 1983, 10). These theoretical distinctions matter very little to practical religious practices. Euthyphro, as a temple priest, would be familiar with this overlap. Temple priests frequently practiced exegesis, not necessarily of texts, but of religious practices. For example, priests would congregate and decide which specific actions in their sect are polluting ones. While the exact nature of exegetic practices varied across regions, all of them had extensive contact with pollution and its associated ceremonies (Parker, 2011, 45). Thus, we can see why pollution is on Euthyphro's mind, and why we should take pollution in general to be distinctly religious in nature. The practical nature of religious life in Athens, which Euthyphro would know well, does not recognize the potential conceptual distinctions that some scholars would like to draw. Thus, Plato, and therefore Euthyphro, would regard Euthyphro's invocation of pollution as a religious matter.

4 WHAT DOES POLLUTION TELL US ABOUT EUTHYPHRO?

Given what has been established, Euthyphro's preoccupation with pollution means this court case is a religious matter. This is especially apparent given his occupation, which would render pollution a central part of his religious practice. From here, I will

connect the religious to the moral, and argue that Euthyphro's conception of his father's pollution is a moral conception, not merely analogous to 'a typhoid germ.'

Euthyphro, after some prompting, defines piety as "that which all the gods love" (*Euth.* 9e1-2). This definition, through some argument, can lead us to see that Euthyphro understands piety as a moral trait. He is presented with a moral dilemma: should he prosecute his father, drawing the ire of his fellow citizens and going against conventional conceptions of filial piety? Or should he not, and let the pollution that resides in his father remain uncleansed, negatively impacting the world, his father, and himself? Since he defines piety as what all the gods love and had previously defined it as "what I am doing now" (*Euth.* 5d7), it stands to reason that Euthyphro believes that the gods should be who he appeals to in order to answer his question about filial prosecution. What "he is doing now" is the action that "all the gods love," and as such Euthyphro derives his confidence from the gods, rightly or wrongly. Euthyphro's moral question, then, is the same as Socrates' question about piety; what is pious, and what is moral, are the same, at least in this particular instance. Given that pollution is also a religious condition, because of the relation it has to the gods, the three concepts, pollution, piety, and morality, are all linked together in Euthyphro's mind. The central ideas that Euthyphro offers up himself are focused on these three issues. If prosecuting his father *is* a moral imperative, it coincides with the will of the gods, and we know this because of the threat of pollution generated by failing to abide by this moral imperative. We cleanse ourselves for the gods, do what the gods love, and look to the gods for moral judgment; this is Euthyphro's basic doctrine.⁴

⁴ This, of course, has some problems; if the gods are constantly squabbling over various issues, some of them moral, looking to them for morality seems problematic for Euthyphro. I do not look to defend Euthyphro at this time. My goal in this section is merely to lay out what we can ascertain from Euthyphro's comments about pollution, and the ways in which we can draw out a religious doctrine from them.

Additionally, we can note that the conception of inner purity, that is, being unpolluted, possesses a moral dimension. Many fables of Greek religion carried with them the emphasis that purity of thought was necessary for purity of action. Petrovic & Petrovic cite the unbeliever at the Asclepieion at Epidaurus, who was told his thoughts must be religiously correct before he would be cured. He was named ‘Apistos,’ or ‘Unbeliever’ for his error. Hesiod warned against impure thoughts about sacrifices. Xenophanes lists as libations both “religiously correct (*euphemoi*) tales and purified (*katharoi*) words” (Petrovic & Petrovic, 2012, 6). Theognis asks Apollo to guide both ‘tongue and mind,’ or speech and thought. Tragic tales often focus on the character’s inner turmoil, along with their motivation for ritual action (Petrovic & Petrovic, 2012, 7). Concluding based on the frequency and ease with which Greek religion intertwined these two concepts, Petrovic and Petrovic conclude, “The moral dimension of purity and pollution had always formed an integral part of the Greek purity doctrine” (Petrovic & Petrovic, 2012, 8). The two concepts were always present together in Ancient Greek legend, and the two are always connected and used in tandem to discuss the two things.

Being a priest, Euthyphro would have been exposed to all of these concepts. It is therefore safe to say that the religious and moral are intertwined for him.⁵ Euthyphro takes what he is doing to be the right thing from a ritual, a pious, and a moral perspective. However, as readers we know this is controversial. He is decried by many for prosecuting his father and accused of filial impiety and wrongdoing. Euthyphro ignores these accusations; he bucks tradition to do what he considers right. Euthyphro, then, is not

⁵ It may or may not be the case that this conflation of morality and piety is necessarily true across Greek religion in general. However, Plato makes Euthyphro a priest, and it is reasonable to assume that Euthyphro would take these concepts to be united based on the fables above.

precisely a stand-in for a religious fundamentalist. He is not a steadfast acolyte of Athenian religion. He stands with it in many ways, such as practices, mythology, worship, and the conception of a warring pantheon, but he departs from it in important ways as well. He has his own views on piety, especially filial piety, that deviate strongly from the traditional sense. He is not a mindless adherent to the traditional ways, although he does believe in some of them, and breaks norms in important respects.

Euthyphro's distinctive conception of piety also tells us that he is concerned with honoring his father, but not in the typical way that would be expected by Athenian standards of filial piety. It would be unusual for a priest to disregard filial piety entirely; if we are to be at all charitable to Euthyphro, we cannot assume he is intentionally disregarding filial piety. Rather, Euthyphro has his own conception of filial piety that we can glean from his comments about pollution.

Being polluted is bad for the person who is polluted. Euthyphro's father has polluted himself by murdering the thrall, and subsequently has taken no action to cleanse himself. He, in all likelihood, does not think he needs to, given the low social status and the murderous actions of the dead man. However, Euthyphro not only thinks that his father has done something wrong, he takes it upon himself to prosecute his father. This leads to two conclusions: first, that Euthyphro thinks his father needs to be cleansed, and so is prosecuting him so that his father pays his due and the pollution can be removed. Second, that Euthyphro's conception of filial piety is very different from the traditional one. If Euthyphro is risking becoming a social pariah in order to prosecute his father, and he believes that his father is polluted, he is not prosecuting his father because he lacks filial piety. He is prosecuting him because of it.

5 THE POSITIVE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF SOCRATES

It is not a coincidence that *Euthyphro* is set immediately prior to Socrates' defense in *Apology*. The reader ends up quite confused about piety in *Euthyphro*. The dialogue ends in impasse, with Socrates and Euthyphro reaching no conclusion about piety. The next step in the story is Socrates' defense. Here, we can learn a few things about Socratic piety. Socrates' trial is when he speaks most directly of his religious beliefs. In the *Apology* and a few other places, Socrates talks about his *daimonion*, a divine sign. The *daimonion* (literally: a divine something) presents itself to Socrates in the form of a voice that tells him when *not* to do something. Scholarship up until recent decades has been sort of embarrassed by the *daimonion*. Socrates, often cast as the father of philosophy and the paradigmatic rational thinker, could not have believed something so odd, [philosophers] thought (McPherran, 2005, 15).⁶

The *daimonion* plays a key role in explaining several aspects of Socratic piety. The *daimonion* gives Socrates "apotreptic signs that warn him *not* to pursue a course of action that he is in the process of initiating" (McPherran, 2005, 16). This means the *daimonion* does not give Socrates any sort of advice about the definitional and moral questions he asks in the dialogue; it merely guides away from bad outcomes. He tells the jury in *Apology*, "It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything" (*Apology* 31d2-4). These revelations are always "unfailingy correct...just as we would expect the gift of an unfailingy good divinity to be" (McPherran, 2005, 16).

McPherran cites Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 4-5, which reads:

⁶ As McPherran notes, prior to 2005 there were only twelve records in the *Philosopher's Index* pertaining to the *daimonion*, and Todd 2001 refers to it as 'philosophically marginal.'

“[Socrates’] counsel was in accordance with divine revelation. Obviously then, he would not have given the counsel if he had not been confident that what he said would come true. And who could have inspired him that confidence but a god? And since he had confidence in the gods, how can he have disbelieved in the existence of the gods?” (Xenophon, 2013, 11).

Why do I cite Xenophon here? I am not committed to the view that Plato is describing a historical Socrates in the so-called early dialogues.⁷ Socrates was an actually existing person, but he is a *character* in the Platonic dialogues. The connection between Xenophon and Plato, then, should not be interpreted as a straightforward mapping of two accounts of Socrates the historical figure. There are not both merely chronicling actual events from different perspectives; Plato’s task is different from Xenophon’s. However, this passage outlines what is already in Plato, namely, the unfailingly good nature of the divine sign, in a more explicit and clear way than Plato does. Xenophon offers an apology for Socrates in his stead, clearly laying out Socrates’ commitment to his religious beliefs. However, there is evidence in Plato corroborating each of these points: that Socrates believes in the divine, and that the divine sign is unfailingly good. In *Apology*, Socrates states that his conviction is good, since his sign did not warn him about going to his trial (*Apology* 40c10-d1). He also defends himself from charges of atheism (*Apology* 27a). However, Plato never brings together all of these things in one space (likely intentionally), and Xenophon does.

Xenophon’s passage gives us the first aspect of Socratic religion as distinct from traditional Greek religion. In Socratic religion, the gods are supremely good (*Apology* 40b10-c1, *Rep.* 379c2-3). Traditional Greek religion contains numerous stories of the gods’ flaws. Zeus’ immoral escapades with women alone provides quick evidence that we would not consider the Greek gods as supremely good, at least in the traditional sense. Socrates also maintains that the

⁷ See Vlastos 1991, Chapters 2 and 3.

gods do not commit any deception, whereas Greek mythology is rife with the gods' trickery and the changing of their forms, with Zeus is a particularly prominent offender (*Rep* 382e8-10). They may be good when you sum up their feats, or good in the sense that they are far better than any person could be, but they would not be good in the sense that Socrates cites here. Socrates thinks that divine origin renders the *daimonion* completely reliable. However, the gods being reliable is patently not the case in most stories of Greek mythology. Socrates is significantly at odds with traditional religion here when he characterizes the divine in this way.

The *daimonion* has guided Socrates throughout his life, but as it cannot give positive advice, it is not Socrates' only source of religious commitment.⁸ In *Apology*, Socrates notes his connection to the Oracle of Delphi. He says, "[Chaerephon] went to Delphi and ventured to ask the oracle...if any man was wiser than I, and [they] replied that no one was wiser" (21a). Socrates was confused by this comment and went out to disprove the oracle. However, he was unable to do so. Socrates' religious beliefs thus develop in conjunction with these two principles: that nobody is wiser and that the *daimonion* does not steer him wrong. Socrates' conception of wisdom is unusual; his first task is to figure out what, precisely, being wiser entails, and his philosophical adventures begin when he attempts to figure out in what sense he is wise, and he finds that the "wise" in Athenian society are anything but.

Burnyeat notes that, for Socrates, "Divinity cannot make people just and virtuous. It can only wait for humans to be virtuous of their own accord, and then it is well pleased" (Burnyeat, 1997, 7). Socrates himself is not a teacher, but people can learn of virtue through the elenchetic process that he enters into with his interlocutors, thus learning without being taught. Burnyeat

⁸ It should be noted that other accounts of Socrates do not commit to this. Xenophon claims that the divine sign does more than merely guide him away from bad effects, but his accounts tend to be exaggerated in some ways; his defense of Socrates is much more motivated by his desire to exonerate Socrates than Plato's is. the *Theages* also claims this, but it is a Pseudo-Platonic dialogue and should not be regarded as authentic (See Lamb 1927).

rightly concludes that Socrates is, indeed, guilty of not believing in the gods of the city (Burnyeat, 1997, 12). His gods are not the traditional gods of Athens at all; informed by his *daimonion*, Socrates' gods sending him on his divine mission have to be different, because of their wholly good nature.

I take Socrates to be specifically religious, rather than merely a moral realist, for a few reasons. The first is the *daimonion*. Socrates has faith in the *daimonion* separate from any philosophical argument. Prior to any confirmation, Socrates is convinced that death is not a harm precisely because of the silence of his *daimonion*. Bussanich writes, “the ‘convincing proof’ that death is not an evil (40c1) is based on daimonic silence, but it is not subject to elenctic confirmation” (Bussanich, 2006, 207). The goodness of the *daimonion* is based on the goodness of the god, which Socrates does not argue for directly. Socrates has arguments for this in the *Phaedo*, but Socrates presents the jury with this argument, justifying to them the faith he has in the god. The second reason I take Socrates to be religious is in his belief in the Oracle of Delphi. His appeal to the Oracle in *Apology* comes when his wisdom is questioned by the jury. Socrates responds, “As for my wisdom — whether I do actually have any and of what kind it may be — I shall call as witness before you the god at Delphi” (*Apology* 20e5-8). His attempts to disconfirm the oracle are underwritten by the fact that Socrates asserts that the god cannot lie; as such, his task is to figure out what wisdom means. This particular attitude toward the oracle indicates Socrates' religious nature. Finally, he mentions in *Phaedo*, “the gods are our guardians and that men are one of their possessions” (*Phaedo* 62b6-7). The phrasing of this passage indicates to me that Socrates cannot merely be talking about the Forms; he ascribes the gods agency when he remarks that they would not want their possessions to kill themselves before its time (*Phaedo* 62c1-2). He also remarks that he would enjoy the company of many good gods after his death

(*Phaedo* 63b8). The gods he invokes here seem far less abstract than mere Forms, and the word ‘guardian’ implies an active role. Socrates invokes these points at different times across many dialogues, showing consistency of belief.

Socrates was written religiously and meant to be read religiously. While some might reasonably think that this is a minor of Socrates’ character, I hold that in the early dialogues especially, it is important to acknowledge his religious beliefs. Socrates’ religious beliefs inform us of the nature of his defense in the *Apology*, which, in turn, can help us understand *Euthyphro*.⁹ It may be an aside to us now, but since Plato wrote his dialogues in a religious society inundated with traditional Athenian religious belief, we should take note of the ways in which Socrates agrees with, and differs from mainstream Athenian belief. By doing this, we can gain a more detailed insight into the way Plato uses this contrast when Socrates invokes his religious beliefs in dialogue.

Socratic religion does not have to be a fully fleshed out doctrine. Rather, it is a commitment to the nature of the god that defies traditional Athenian conceptions.¹⁰ From this evidence, Socrates is committed to at least three key propositions: (1) the god is all good; (2) the god is all wise, and (3) Socrates is being directly guided by the god, or, in other words, that the god directly intervenes.¹¹ This is mostly clearly stated in the *Republic*. Socrates notes that “since a god is good...he alone is responsible for the good things” and not anything bad (*Rep.* 379c2-3). Thus, Socrates rejects the Athenian view of squabbling gods who produce negative effects on undeserving people, like indiscriminating pollution. If nothing bad can possibly come from the

⁹ A further potentially philosophically important task would be to analyze other early Socratic dialogues through this lens. However, this is beyond the scope of my focus on *Euthyphro*.

¹⁰ Socrates uses, and I will use, the singular at *Apology* 22a2.

¹¹ Based on the accounts Socrates gives of the Oracle of Delphi in the *Apology*, this god is usually taken to be Apollo.

gods, then the doctrine of indiscriminating pollution that the traditional Athenian view subscribes to cannot possibly remain under Socratic religion. The form of pollution that Socrates is concerned with is a polluted soul in a moral sense.¹² However, this is not something that comes from the gods, but from the failings of humans.

Athenian religion views the gods as a pantheon, rather than as a united entity. The gods are certainly not good, as any gloss over Greek myth will tell one. A *daimonion*-like blessing, while not unheard of, is rare, and would not typically be given to someone like Socrates. Heroes of Greek myth were people such as Hercules, Odysseus, and Theseus. All of these men were great warriors. Socrates, by receiving the *daimonion*, has been elevated to this heroic status. However, he is an atypical hero. Rather than solely representing the virtues of bravery and prowess in battle, Socrates prizes wisdom above all else. In the *Euthydemus*, Socrates says that one cannot make use of any other good without wisdom, and as such, wisdom is the highest good in virtue of being necessary for all others (*Euth.* 281b1-4). This not to say that Greek myth neglects wisdom, or that Socrates does not value other virtues, but the priorities with respect to virtue have shifted. Socrates shifts not only religious standards, but standards of virtue, as well.

Socrates' goal, then, that he has been divinely assigned, is to improve the states of the souls of the people of Athens. His goal is to persuade people to care for the state of their soul rather than their body or wealth (*Apology* 30a8-b2). His theory on what benefits the soul contradicts the traditional views of sacrifice. One would generally make an offering to the gods in order to cleanse oneself of pollution, but Socrates himself thinks that these things are unimportant. Turning back to *Euthyphro*, Socrates contests the notion that the gods benefit from anything we could give them. He asks, "What benefit do the gods derive from the gifts they

¹² While not Socrates himself, the visitor in *Sophist* 230a-e says that moral failings have to be cleansed, using the same language that one would use for religious cleansing.

receive from us?” (*Euth.* 14e8-9), and the ensuing dialogue fails to yield any promising answers, implying that anything we could give the gods could not be beneficial, and thus putting traditional religious rites in a precarious place. The notion that we may not benefit the gods runs up against the traditional idea that one’s sacrifice matters to the gods in any substantial way. If, as Socrates implies, the gods have no need for what we give them in our tributes, then sacrifice is rendered far less important for religious purposes; if the gods do not need anything from us, this includes our admiration. If the gods do not need anything from us, then cleansing pollution through sacrifice cannot be important; if our souls are polluted, this is bad for us, but offering sacrifices to the gods is not what we ought to do in response. Improving the states of our souls requires not the religious rite of sacrifice, but learning about and implementing the virtues that Socrates espouses, like wisdom, courage, and so on.

The proposal that Socrates has positive religious beliefs may run into a complication. Socrates seems to *know* (or at least he is confident) that he is on a divine mission, yet he claims that he has no idea what piety is. These two things are in tension with each other: how can one be on a divine mission and yet remain ignorant about what piety is? One explanation is that Socrates is just lying to Euthyphro, only pretending not to know what piety is in order to make a fool of him. This could be the case, but this paints Socrates in an unduly negative light, and there is a more plausible explanation that uses what Plato tells us about the nature of Socrates’ religious beliefs. Socrates’ advice from the *daimonion* is only prohibitive in nature; it tells him what not to do. Because of this, Socrates has to proceed through trial and error. Solely prohibitive instructions will not produce a great deal of clarity on positive religious doctrine. Since Socrates is primarily considered with ethical issues, his grasp of religious issues beyond “the states of souls” is limited. Thus, we ought to not read Socrates as being dishonest, but limited in his

convictions. Grasping the concept of piety is a tall order, as *Euthyphro* shows us. A fully articulated conception of piety would require things like a moral theology, an analysis of what religious rites are important, and practical implications. Socrates' ideas are mostly theoretical; having the ideas I outlined above about virtue and the divine does not entail the kind of definitional knowledge about piety.

The reader learns some inadequate definitions of piety from *Euthyphro*. Socrates rejects the claim that piety is a matter of doing what Euthyphro is doing now, prosecuting his father. This is not necessarily saying that what he is doing is impious, but the individual action of prosecuting his father is inadequate as a definition. Socrates also rejects either horn of the Euthyphro dilemma as sufficient for a definition: that what is pious is god-loved or what is god-loved is pious. As noted above, piety cannot be a system of bartering; there is nothing that we could offer the gods.

Socrates' goal of improving the states of the souls of the people of Athens is, if not the same as, similar in concept to cleansing pollution. While the two have different methods of cleansing, with pollution needing sacrifice and the soul needing the development of virtue through *elenchus*, both have a stain that needs to be removed in order to better the person's divine worth. If pollution is a moral condition, then many of the moral failings of the soul can be applied in the same contexts in which people become polluted. People often become polluted through moral failings, so there is a great deal of overlap between the unvirtuous soul and the polluted one in Socratic and Athenian religion, respectively.

It is important, as I noted above, that Euthyphro *agrees* that we cannot benefit the gods when we sacrifice to them (*Euth.* 13c6). This is an important point of agreement between the two of them; Euthyphro has some leaning toward the Socratic conception of the gods without

realizing it. It is not a fleshed-out idea; Euthyphro does not seem to realize that this implies a kind of perfection in the gods that traditional Athenian religion lacks. However, this is an important area where the two agree in a way that a traditional Athenian view would not align with Socrates' convictions on the topic.

In line with Socrates saying that we should not value the body over the soul, Euthyphro is willing to get his father potentially imprisoned, exiled, or worse to cleanse his father's pollution. It is true that there is something at stake for Euthyphro: he takes himself to be vulnerable to pollution's effects, as well. However, the fact that Euthyphro takes it on himself to prosecute his father is significant. He could cleanse himself by distancing himself from his father and performing a sacrifice (traditionally speaking) without ever involving himself in the courts. The reason he involves himself in the court is for his father's sake; he feels obligated, *because of* filial piety. Euthyphro's goal is small compared to Socrates', since he seeks to save one person's soul rather than the souls of everyone in a city, but both feel an obligation to improve the states of the souls of people they care about. Euthyphro's motives, too, are very Socratic in nature; he elects to prosecute his father to cleanse his pollution because it would be prudentially bad for him to be polluted. In *Crito*, Socrates notes that being just is good *for* you, because being a just person is both morally good and beneficial in life (*Crito* 53d1). Therefore, Euthyphro's self-serving motivation, rather than being an anomaly, fits into Socrates' scheme well. Both also shirk any care for what others think of them; Euthyphro is willing to become a pariah by violating traditional standards of filial piety, and Socrates actually does die for his mission. Socrates' religious beliefs differ from Athenian religion in his conception of the god as all good and concerned principally with the states of people's souls. Euthyphro has this same principal concern in his conception of religion.

To argue for the positive aspects of Socrates' religious belief above does not commit me to the proposition that Socrates has a fully fleshed out conception of piety that he goes into the dialogue with, or any conception at all. One potential view is that Socrates knows what piety is when he goes into his conversation with Euthyphro. This is often coupled with a conception of Socratic religion that has specific ideas about God, piety, religious obligations, and so on. This potential view would differ from the account I provide in the sense that these accounts have a much wider scope and require far more argumentation. For example, McPherran 1996 devotes its fifth chapter to an account of Socratic religion, including cosmology, theological proofs, moral theology, and more. Vlastos 1991 has a smaller but still robust section on Socratic Piety, as well, elaborating on Socrates' mysticism. I am not embarking on the type of project that McPherran and Vlastos took on. Whether Socrates has an expansive religious conception or not has little impact on the subject of Euthyphro's beliefs. However, what we can glean about Socrates' views of piety from *Apology* and *Euthyphro* is informative enough to give us a rough sketch of Socratic piety. I do not seek to claim anything further than these few suppositions.

6 DOES EUTHYPHRO'S BAD REASONING IMPUGN HIS CHARACTER?

While I have been kinder to Euthyphro than most are, there is another way that an analysis of his character could play out. My thesis is focused on rehabilitating Euthyphro's character by focusing on his concern for the soul of his father, a similar concern to Socrates' concern for the souls of the people of Athens. However, I do concede that Euthyphro is not a good rational interlocutor. This presents a possible objection: Euthyphro prosecutes his father without being able to argue for his position, and this is a significant character flaw. This is the position that Adler and Vasiliou take in their paper "Inferring Character from Reasoning: The Example of Euthyphro." I will consider their argument here, and respond

using Euthyphro's commitment to cleansing pollution to allay some of their criticisms. I will note here that I agree with their approach; dialogues are concerned not just with arguments but also with illustrating truths about the characters making them. However, I believe their specific criticisms are unwarranted. After that, I will discuss Euthyphro's character in general, and note that while his stubbornness is a character flaw, this flaw is not as pernicious as other characters in the Socratic dialogues or Athens in general.

Adler and Vasiliou do not think that being inept at arguing is, in itself, a moral failing. They write, "It is a different matter, however, when we are confronted with sustained bad reasoning or argumentation that neither rests on a false assumption nor is guilty of a logical mistake" (Adler & Vasiliou, 2008, 43). Adler and Vasiliou are focused on both *sustained* bad reasoning (Euthyphro does not change his mind) or argumentation that arises from somewhere other than logical failure.

Adler and Vasiliou note that Euthyphro has a kind of tunnel vision when it comes to the case at hand. They say, "Euthyphro must defend not only that it is right to prosecute his father for murder, but that it is right for him, the son, specifically, to do the prosecuting. But Euthyphro treats the demand of piety to prosecute as so obvious and forceful that it completely outweighs any potential impiety of prosecuting your father, so that he is not required to even bring forth any counterevidence or counterargument" (Adler & Vasiliou, 2008, 48). The character defect that Adler and Vasiliou are pointing to is related to what his contemporaries accuse him of: a failure of "dialectical relevance" (Adler & Vasiliou, 2008, 48). Euthyphro, in the dialogue, is accused of filial impiety, or not paying proper reverence to his father, a charge which he ignores. Adler and Vasiliou's criticism is a bit more subtle: they criticize Euthyphro for not properly considering that he *potentially* be acting impiously

with respect to his father. Euthyphro must justify not only prosecution, but his particular act of prosecution. His arguments fail to be relevant to his father's court case.

On my reading, Euthyphro prosecutes his father *because* of filial piety, as noted above. The pollution that comes with his father's murder harms his father. Euthyphro believes he is doing something for his father, as well as the gods, when he prosecutes his father. He is being a bit impetuous, yes, but his conviction is rooted in the theological conception of pollution, which, it should be noted, *would* be obvious to most Athenians. The reason that Euthyphro is prosecuting his father is that he believes this is the only way to cleanse this pollution, as he has a non-standard view according to which sacrifice or tribute would be insufficient. He must do this principally for two reasons: (1) that he has an obligation as his father's son to cleanse his father (or, at least, he believes that he does) and (2) that nobody else would take the case. (1) I have established above, (2) is a likely supposition. If so many people are skeptical of Euthyphro's claim, it is a decidedly unpopular position, and one few people are likely to pursue. If nobody else wants to take Euthyphro's case, then he must take it up himself in order to cleanse the pollution on his father. This may not excuse his unflappability entirely, but it does mitigate it. If he believes his father to be in danger, then his determination is more understandable. This would excuse his hastiness, and also provide a justification for Euthyphro doing this *himself*, if no one else will. Euthyphro's reasoning is that inaction is *dangerous* due to the pollution that his father bears. This renders his weighing of piety and impiety far more reasonable; Euthyphro's evidence is his religious beliefs with respect to pollution. The demands of piety *are* obvious and forceful if one properly considers the effects of pollution: that it is dangerous and can spread if left unchecked. There is potential complication, however, if Euthyphro's father is

not polluted at all. However, even if Euthyphro's father is not guilty of *murder*, he is at least guilty of what today we call manslaughter. Legally, the difference between the two in Attic law "turns on the presence or absence of the intent to kill" (Panagiotou, 1974, 421).

Euthyphro might be wrong here about which charge to pursue, but there is at least enough evidence that prosecuting his father is not out of the question. It seems unlikely that if the case were impossible to win, Plato would have constructed it in this way; the dialogue would make no sense if there were not any real stakes. Panagiotou writes, "Notice, Euthyphro's wording at 4d suggests clearly that the question of the man's maltreatment and the possibility of his dying had come up, but it was put aside by his father on the grounds that it made no difference since the man was a murderer" (Panagiotou, 1974, 421). The wording that I believe Panagiotou is picking up on in 4d is, "During that time he gave no thought or care to the bound man, as being a killer, and it was no matter if he died, which he did" (*Euth.* 4d2-3). This phrasing as something Euthyphro's father has said directly is important here; it implies an awareness of the possibility of the man's death, which provides Euthyphro evidence that it was not an accident. The fact that he was a murderer might be a moral defense, but not a legal one; Attic law states, "If a man shall kill a murderer, or shall cause him to be killed [i.e., is responsible for his death]...he shall be liable to the same penalty as if he killed an Athenian citizen" (Dem. 23,37 cited in Panagiotou, 422, 1974). Euthyphro might be impious, and he ignores that, but legally, he is on firm ground for his prosecution, at least.

Adler and Vasiliou accuse Euthyphro of not considering facts that might undermine his argument, citing Euthyphro's explanation of the details surrounding his case. A good account of the case that avoids these mitigating complexities, they hold, "would

require that he articulate many details and show exactly how they support his case” (Adler & Vasiliou, 2008, 48). In other words, Euthyphro’s lack of detail in his case is suspicious; he leaves out too much that might hurt his account.

Past the early sections of the dialogue, Socrates seems relatively uninterested in the particulars of Euthyphro’s case. The case at hand stops being mentioned at Stephanus page 6; it does not seem that Plato wanted to spend much time on it. In any case, we do not know what would have happened if Socrates had pressed Euthyphro for more details instead of turning to piety. It is suggested by Euthyphro’s background as a priest and his quick pivot to pollution that he is concerned with practical affairs. His knowledge of practical affairs is certainly a cut above his theoretical knowledge, which falls flat in the face of Socrates’ questioning about piety. We are given two clues to Euthyphro’s practical knowledge: the first, as I noted above, is that fact that legally, his case is relatively strong, and second, that he is a temple priest, and plays a practical role in exegesis and other religious practices. I am not claiming that the two questions “ought I prosecute my father?” and “what is piety?” are unrelated, but I am claiming that Euthyphro would have a better answer to the first question than the second. If we read Euthyphro charitably, the lack of details in his account might not be read as a matter of trickery, but merely as a matter of dialogue; the conversation simply did not go in a way that required Euthyphro to expand further.

Their next criticism is that Euthyphro is too quick to act and does not fully consider the consequences of his actions. “Taking account of the extreme cost of misjudgment (in this case, the unjustified execution of one's own father) is crucial to inferring character from reasoning, even though it requires the sharpest deviation from a focus on reasoning alone” (Adler & Vasiliou, 2008, 49). Adler and Vasiliou here note the

high stakes of the case before Euthyphro. If Euthyphro is wrong, then his father is executed unjustly. If Euthyphro neglects to consider his case carefully, we ought to think of him as recklessly negligent in his deeds.

Euthyphro's actions are explicable in terms of pollution. The danger from action is potentially great if Euthyphro is unjustified, but the potential danger from inaction is even greater if he *is* justified, for Euthyphro, his father, and the rest of Athens. Of particular concern for Euthyphro is the fate of his father. The person most cited in danger of the pollution of a murder is the murderer himself. Parker writes:

It is the killer himself whose peril is most frequently mentioned. The murderer goes mad, and not in the elaborate mythological histories of Orestes and Alcmaeon alone; in the *Hippolytus*, the nurse reacts to Phaedra's derangement by asking 'Are your hands clean of blood, child?' and Amphitryon in the *Heracles* suppose for a moment, remarkably that the hero has been drive mad *even by his justified revenge against Lycus*. (Parker, 1983, 128-9, emphasis mine)

Euthyphro, who as a temple priest would have been aware of these myths, would be acutely aware of the peril his father is in. It is not the thought of his father's punishment that unsettles him the most, but the thought of his father being in a polluted state and succumbing to madness. The alternative, even worse, is that his father dies in a polluted state, threatening his status in the afterlife.

There are some facts when examining an argument that are not relevant to the argument directly, but rather present a problem for the person's mentality when they make the argument. These facts affect someone's disposition toward an argument. Adler and Vasiliou call these "external reasons" (Adler & Vasiliou, 2008 50). Euthyphro has a number of compelling reasons to think that he is not being objective in his assessment: he is close to the person he is prosecuting, the views of his family, and the public reaction. Thus, it is hard

for Euthyphro to take an objective view on the matter. A good reasoner would take this into consideration when looking at his argument, ask himself how these external reasons are playing in to his thinking, and possibly recuse himself from the case. Euthyphro does none of these things, and thus is liable for being willfully ignorant about the issue. While this may be true, external reasons such as pollution pull Euthyphro in the other direction, as well; there are compelling external reasons both to prosecute and not to prosecute. Euthyphro's external reasons are counterbalancing, pulling him in each direction. Additionally, these external reasons do not matter to the internal reasons of the argument about piety, but, importantly, the reverse is true as well; Euthyphro's actions can be considered irrespective of their piety to be right or wrong from a legal perspective.

Adler and Vasiliou respond to something similar to my view when they attack the "Sincerity Defense." They ask, "What if, though, the reasoner [Euthyphro] sincerely believes his argument, which just happens to be markedly poor?" (Adler & Vasiliou, 2008, 51). I am not sure Euthyphro even does believe some of his arguments about piety; he was caught on the spot and argues so poorly that it might be the case that he is not sure what he thinks piety is, precisely. However, his conviction in the prosecution of his father is sincere, and I believe this sincerity stems from his fear of the power of pollution. However, "The question is: given that the argument is sincere, how can anyone argue that way?" (Adler & Vasiliou, 2008, 51). Euthyphro's argument is so bad, Adler and Vasiliou think his sincerity does not save him. If he is sincere, it actually becomes worse.

Euthyphro's religious doctrine does not come from an argument about piety, in much the same way that most religious believers do not come to their faith through the Cosmological Argument. It comes from his beliefs about pollution and his commitment to

cleansing his father through prosecution. I concede immediately that Euthyphro ought to present his case against his father better, and do believe that he ought to have more substantial underpinnings for his belief. However, understanding pollution and Euthyphro's idea of it, while it may not totally exonerate Euthyphro of the charges presented against him in Adler and Vasiliou's article, allows us to understand his reasons for acting—that he is concerned for his father and for the pollution that will spread if he does not act.

There are two additional potential objections that I will consider that do not come from Adler and Vasiliou. These objections refer to the form that Euthyphro's beliefs take, rather than the content. The objectionable part of Euthyphro's character is not itself, but rather his unjustifiable confidence in holding them. Euthyphro plays a social role as a priest, and as such assumes that his knowledge of piety is justified in terms of his social role and his understanding of ritual practice. However, Euthyphro, as I admit, is unjustified in believing that he has knowledge of piety. The problem may not be that Euthyphro is mistaken about his knowledge of piety, but that even after Socrates' cross-examination, that he is unshakeable in his beliefs.

With this in mind, one might suggest that Euthyphro represents the same sort of intractability that the accusers in *Apology* present immediately after the end of the *Euthyphro*. Meletus refuses to cede any ground after his engagement with Socrates, remaining steadfast in his push for the death penalty (*Apology* 25d). Considering that *Euthyphro* and *Apology*, chronologically, take place one after the other, it would be easy to map these same tendencies from Euthyphro to these judges, or vice versa upon a rereading of *Euthyphro*. The judges in *Apology* are quite clearly villains in the story of Socrates. However, I have contended above that we ought not to read Euthyphro as one. The question

remains: what differentiates Euthyphro from these judges, if both are stubborn and intransigent in their reasoning? Even if the two are different in their motivations, the stubbornness of Euthyphro is the same character flaw as the judges in Socrates' case.

I do not seek to completely absolve Euthyphro of this charge; he clearly has a problem with stubbornness, and he is not capable of answering complex theological questions. However, contrasting Euthyphro's social role with that of the judges is illuminating to the difference between the two, even if they share similar faults. By doing this, I hope to show that the same character flaw in each dialogue can have different consequences, and that Euthyphro, while flawed, does not pass over to the point where he is *immoral*, as the judges do.

Euthyphro's social role consists in being a temple priest. As I outlined above, this consists primarily in tasks such as conducting ritual sacrifice and cleansing rituals. Temple priests typically did not have a particularly developed theology. They had interpretations of doctrine, like Euthyphro's above, but theologians like Hesiod contributed far more to the substance of Greek religious practice. Euthyphro, I do not believe, is meant to be particularly different from other temple priests in this regard. Almost no temple priest could stand up to Socrates' scrutiny, since Socrates is the wisest in Athens. Euthyphro's social role makes him prideful, and his pride makes him not admit when he is wrong, but figures of authority often participate in this behavior, and he is not unique among them. What makes Euthyphro interesting, under my reading, is that he has some inkling of what something similar to Socratic religion might look like but fails to make the connections that he ought to make intellectually. Euthyphro's social role does not necessarily *require* him to understand piety, though he would likely be a better priest if he did. What his role requires is the

administration of ritual practices, which one can regard as pious without having a clear idea as to why.

The judges' role is more intricately tied with justice. A judge need not have a detailed Socratic definition of justice but should have the ability to identify just or unjust actions. Euthyphro, to a certain extent, can point to an action and say it is pious, and have good reasons for doing so, even if he cannot articulate them. The judges in Socrates' case lack the ability to do even this. Their social role is also more significant. Euthyphro's conception of piety, in most circumstances, does not carry a great deal of weight. The exception to this is the present case in the dialogue, which I have argued above is legally justified, if not piously. The judges have only one dimension by which to judge Socrates, and it is the invocation of the law in a just fashion. As such, the judges' social role sets them apart from Euthyphro. They may have the same character flaw, but the judges have a social role that allows this character flaw to take on a more impactful and pernicious dimension. I do not think this absolves Euthyphro, but I think it lessens the impact somewhat. Euthyphro is an obnoxious person, as are many authority figures. His character is flawed, but I think in no more a profound way than many other Athenians. He is partially redeemed by his care for the state of his father's polluted soul, which sets him apart both from other Athenian priests and Athenian authority figures. Euthyphro is the type of character that gets a lot wrong, but there is something at his core, his concern for pollution, that plants a seed of right.

7 CONCLUSION

If my above account is correct, an obvious question follows: why would Plato write Euthyphro and *Euthyphro* this way? I think there are a few reasons to endorse my account. First, it renders the character Euthyphro more well-rounded. I do not think Plato meant Euthyphro to be a two-dimensional religious zealot; not only is that not very interesting, it is not very instructive. Euthyphro himself is a cautionary tale; he is what happens when you get some of the religious ideas of Socrates with none of the reasoning. He has some of the ideas of Socratic piety, but he does not have the intellectual weight to back up his ideas; thus, he ends up looking confused and foolish. Euthyphro does not have his own *daimonion*. His ideas are cobbled together and haphazard. He fails to consider the consequences of the gods not benefitting from human action and fails to identify how his ideas about cleansing map on to piety, but he latches on to a very important point when he becomes preoccupied with cleansing his father's soul through prosecution. The goal of improving the states of people's souls is the right one, but Euthyphro does not really understand the mechanisms and Socrates' motivations for doing so. Socrates' religious beliefs divert heavily from traditional Athenian religion, but Euthyphro is trapped between Athenian religion and Socratic religion, which is why he clings to the concept of pollution but is forward-looking in his commitment to cleansing it.

Second, Euthyphro's comment about pollution places us in the historical context of the dialogue. One might ask why pollution is only mentioned once in the dialogue, and Socrates never follows up with the line of thought I articulate in this paper. I contend that it would be so obviously strange to someone steeped in the culture of Athens for Euthyphro to jump to prosecuting his father to cleanse his pollution that the Athenian reader would note

the discrepancy. Cleansing was typically conducted in a religious setting; the courtroom would be a last resort. It would be strange in a similar way to the rest of the case: the son prosecuting his father, all the fuss over a slave, and so on. By filling out the concept of pollution, we can more accurately tell how Euthyphro would have sounded to an Athenian, and thus, how Plato would know he would be read.

Euthyphro is a dialogue that has spawned many different interpretations, and above I have constructed yet another one. Given all of these competing interpretations, one might ask why one should adopt my reading. I will discuss some interpretations before remarking on the benefits of mine. I wish to note here that while I may find the readings below inadequate for the reasons I discuss, not all of the readings are incompatible with my stance. One can endorse, say, an ironic reading while also being convinced of the religious nature of Socrates and the odd parallels with Euthyphro. One might have to slightly modify their reading if they agree that Euthyphro should be taken a bit more sympathetically, as I do, but the overall arc of the dialogue can be ironic while we still note that Euthyphro is committed to certain things that make him more similar to Socrates than one might think.

If one reads Euthyphro as a straightforward divine command theorist about morals, then Socrates very unambiguously comes out victorious. On this reading, Euthyphro is a subjectivist about morals and Socrates is an objectivist. Fendt notes, “Euthyphro does not find a cure for this subjectivism” (Fendt 2014, 496). This reading presents Euthyphro as slavishly devoted to “literalism” about Greek myth; the gods do things, thus making them right, and we know what they did through myth (Fendt, 2014, 499). I’ve argued above that Euthyphro does have some moral commitments not expressed in his discussion of piety. Additionally, it seems unjustified to take Euthyphro as a subjectivist in the dialogue. One

might argue that Euthyphro is a subjectivist because he seems to have a flexible standard of piety at the outset of the dialogue. When he remarks that piety is “that which all the gods love,” it seems like what the gods love can change on a whim (*Euth.* 9e1-2). If all of the gods love justice today, they could love murder tomorrow, and there would be no contradiction in this account. However, I hold that there is evidence later on the dialogue that precludes Euthyphro from being a subjectivist or divine command theorist. Rather than his later remarks being confused and backing down from his position, I argue that Euthyphro’s first remark is confused, and he clarifies later on. This clarification comes near the end of the dialogue. Euthyphro remarks, “I think, Socrates, that the godly and pious is the part of the just that is concerned with the care of the gods, while that concerned with the care of men is the remaining part of justice” (*Euth.* 12e5-7). By making piety a *part* of justice, Euthyphro is implicitly committing to a model that renders him an objectivist. There is something outside of what the gods love that determines what is just or not, independent of the gods themselves. Piety is not something on its own, but something participating in justice, and the gods themselves are a part of that relationship. Thus, I hold that the dialogue cannot be read so straightforwardly as an objectivist position against a subjectivist position, but rather two different understandings of some overlapping principles of religious belief.

One could also read the dialogue as an exercise in elenchus that justifiably ends in an impasse. As Fendt phrases it: “The dialogue is elenctic because the dilemmas are true” (Fendt 499). The nature of piety, on this reading, is just unreachable. Socrates, here, is read as a skeptic about religious matters, or at least standing in for one. This reading is compatible with the one I have provided, because my reading does not commit to anything specific about piety, either with respect to Socrates’ beliefs or Euthyphro’s. I do not think

this reading is enough to be fully informed about the dialogue, as we then miss the nature of Socrates' religious belief and its similarities with Euthyphro's odd version of Athenian religion. This reading is adequate, but I hold that it ought to be supplemented with the analysis I have put forward.

A third option is to read the dialogue ironically, either as "The dialogue produces a double irony: Socrates (early Plato) is a skeptic, but that is no answer" or "The irony is in the existence of the dialogue" (Fendt, 2014, 505). The first ironic interpretation picks out both Euthyphro as ironically not knowing what piety is, but thinking he knows, and doing something impious because of that. However, Socrates is also a victim of this irony, because he is killed because he is impious, but he does not know what piety is, and is pointing out that nobody else knows, either. The ironic tension arises from piety having such an impact on the characters of the dialogue, but nobody is able to even say what it is. The other ironic interpretation can be summed up: "Socrates thus intends an ironic promise in becoming Euthyphro's student, namely, 'under no circumstances will he change his way of philosophizing'" (Fendt, 2014, 507). The dialogue represents Socrates' influence in every mode of religious thinking. Both ironic readings are at least partially right, but an ironic reading is insufficient for an overall view of the dialogue. *Euthyphro* cannot be *just* ironic, since the themes there are iterated in a number of future dialogues. It seems a bold and unlikely claim that all the dialogues are meant to be read completely ironically. We can supplement our reading by noting instances of irony, but we should not read the dialogue primarily in this way.

If you accept my reading of the dialogue, there are a number of benefits. The first is that tying together Euthyphro's conceptions of religion with Socrates' ties in to many of

the later dialogues, producing more cohesion between the dialogues. The dialogues ought to be read with these themes (Socratic theology, the betterment of souls, and so on) in mind; it produces a philosophically more coherent narrative, and it is likely that this is what Plato intends us to do. He does, after all, reuse the character of Socrates in most of the dialogues. A benefit of considering pollution in particular is that it informs our understanding of the cultural context surrounding Plato's writing. Plato's contemporaries would have the knowledge of what pollution is and why Euthyphro is preoccupied with it, but most discussions of the dialogue gloss over Euthyphro's remarks about pollution. Plato, like anyone else, is historically located in a particular culture; whenever one does interpretive work, one should bear in mind the ways in which an audience would receive something differently than a modern reader. The last benefit I will list here is that it provides the characters depth. Many of the above readings reduce either Socrates or Euthyphro to ideas, not characters. This is an interpretive step that makes it much easier to analyze a dialogue but misses a great deal of detail. If Plato wanted to write a treatise, he would have. He used characters for a particular reason, and to treat them merely as stand-ins for philosophical ideas misses many of the idiosyncrasies in the dialogue. We ought to, as readers, take the idea of interpreting characters seriously in Plato, or, more broadly, to remember that interpretation requires a great deal of nuance. To flatten characters in the way that many past interpreters have makes the interpretations much more simple, cohesive, and wrong.

We do not know how Euthyphro's case turns out. If it was historical, it is lost to history; if it was fictional, Plato never brings it up again. It remains unknown to us if he called off his case after his conversation with Socrates, or if he prosecuted his father and cleansed the pollution, or failed and was left stained. We do know how Socrates' story ends,

with his city turning on him and executing him for impiety. Socrates, at least on a large scale, fails in his divine mission; most people in Athens do not seem to have gained the wisdom he sought to impart.

Plato, however, gives us no reason to believe this has an adverse effect on Socrates. Socrates characterizes his death as a blessing in both the *Apology* and the *Phaedo*, presenting us with one of his strongest convictions. He appears unconcerned about the pollution he leaves behind, having tried his best to help the people of Athens. If Socrates is right about his failure not impacting him, then Euthyphro, no matter the case's outcome, might still escape his own pollution. So even if Euthyphro fails to cleanse his father, he may find some divine hope after all.

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